

Social Inferences Concerning Male and Female Homeowners Who Use a Gun to Shoot an Intruder

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Two experiments were performed to test the hypothesis that gender stereotypes influence social inferences about homeowners who use a gun to shoot an intruder. It was predicted that homeowners who violate stereotypical norms would be perceived more negatively, and would be perceived as more responsible for the consequences of their weapon use than would homeowners of both genders who represent stereotype-consistency. The data from the first experiment provided some support for this notion. Male homeowners who shot incompetently were perceived more negatively than were men who shot the intruder with competence. The opposite trend was observed for female homeowners. The second experiment tested a refinement of this hypothesis and revealed how attitudes toward guns, specifically degree of acceptance of the notion that guns provide their owners with protection, moderates the social judgments formed about homeowners who use weapons as a means of defending their property during a burglary. Persons for whom the event is inconsistent with their attitude-based expectancies blamed the stereotype-inconsistent homeowners more than the gender stereotype-consistent homeowners, particularly the skillful female shooters. Individuals with relatively negative attitudes toward guns, in contrast, tended to perceive the skillful female shooters more positively than the other homeowners. Perceptions of weapons users who find themselves and their actions scrutinized by the media and the court system may depend upon perceivers' pre-existing category expectations and attitudes. © 1993 Wiley-Liss, Inc.

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INTRODUCTION

Guns have played a prominent role in American history and popular culture [Hofstadter, 1970]. Weapons ownership is widespread among private citizens in the United States.

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The available sociological evidence indicates that as of 1980 roughly every other household possesses at least one gun [Wright et al., 1983]. The National Rifle Association, a prominent anti-gun-control organization, argues that gun ownership among private citizens acts as a deterrent to crime. Kleck and Bordua's [1983] review of interview studies with convicted burglars indicates that these prisoners do report being keenly aware of the possibility that a homeowner might possess a gun and use it to injure them. While the percentage of burglars who are foiled by a homeowner is exceedingly small (2%), this risk is if anything slightly greater than the probability that a burglar will ever be convicted and imprisoned [Wright et al., 1983]. Despite this small potential for homeowners' effectively using a weapon to defend themselves during a crime, other evidence suggests that gun possession might elevate the likelihood of injury to homeowners [Wright et al., 1983].

Regardless of whether widespread gun ownership does or does not in fact serve as an effective deterrent to burglars, many citizens concur with this notion. Branscombe et al. [1991] report that males particularly show moderate agreement with the "guns provide protection from crime" subscale of their Attitudes Toward Guns measure. Representative survey data concerning weapons ownership is consistent with this attitude research; approximately half of all handguns in the United States are purchased with the stated purpose of self-defense [Wright et al., 1983]. Yet as Yeager et al. [1976] report, only 3% of the American population have ever actually used a handgun for protection purposes, although 4% have been involved in a handgun accident.

In the past, gun ownership has been primarily a male-only phenomenon [Arkin and Dobrofsky, 1978; Smith and Uchida, 1988]. Sex differences in advocating the use of force and acceptance of violence remain [see Eagly and Steffen, 1986; Shapiro and Mahajan, 1986]. There is, however, evidence that American women are increasingly purchasing guns for protection, and that they are more afraid of victimization than are men [Lizotte and Bordua, 1980; Quigley, 1989]. In fact, because gun manufacturers perceive women to be a growing market, Smith and Wesson, the largest American handgun manufacturer, has recently marketed a .38 caliber revolver—the Ladysmith—with women as the intended consumer group. Representatives of this company argue that there are increasing numbers of women who are heads of households and homeowners; they therefore need and want a gun to protect themselves and their families from home intruders (Pero, personal communication, April 18, 1989). It is difficult to determine exactly how many of the weapons in private hands are owned by women. Recent estimates of the number of women owning guns varies from 12 to 42 million [Quigley, 1989; Wright et al., 1983].

People who fire a weapon at an intruder are very likely to receive considerable scrutiny from the police, the media, and potentially even the court system. How such judgments are arrived at is therefore an important issue, particularly with the increase in gun ownership that has been occurring. The present research was designed to examine how gender stereotypes influence judgments of homeowners who use a gun against an intruder during a burglary of their residence. Prior research indicates that gun ownership itself is stereotype-inconsistent for women [Branscombe and Owen, 1991] and results in their being perceived as atypical and as psychologically and physically similar to men, relative to women who do not own a gun. Research not involving guns *per se* has found that both men and women who are stereotype-inconsistent tend to provoke attributional processing, and they are perceived as more causally responsible for any

negative outcome that results from their behavior, relative to persons who do not violate social norms [Branscombe and Weir, 1992; Butler and Geis, 1990; Clary and Tesser, 1983; Costrich et al., 1975; Hagen and Kahn, 1975; Kelly et al., 1980; Pyszczynski and Greenberg, 1981].

Using Kahneman and Miller's [1986] norm theory as a theoretical guide, we reasoned that a male homeowner who uses a gun incompetently during a burglary of his residence (i.e., is stereotype-inconsistent because he missed the intended target) would be perceived as more abnormal than would a male homeowner who uses a gun competently (i.e., successfully hits the target aimed at). Abnormal or unusual actions, according to the theory, as a consequence of how easy they are to imagine being otherwise, are much more likely to be mentally simulated than are normal or typical ones. When alternatives to reality are believed to result in a different outcome than what did occur, then perceived causality of the original action is elevated [Wells and Gavanski, 1989]. Thus, when the male shooter is incompetent, observers should be more likely to consider him the cause of the outcome and possibly even guilty of a crime himself for shooting the intruder. When, however, the homeowner is "normal" because he matches gender stereotype-based expectancies, it should be more difficult to imagine him being different. As Kahneman and Miller [1986] note, abnormal events are much more likely to be mentally changed to normal ones than are normal ones made more atypical. If gender stereotypes are guiding inferences about the homeowner's guilt, according to the above reasoning, this pattern of greater perceptions of guilt for the incompetent male shooter compared to the competent male shooter should occur even though the incompetent shooter causes a *less* severe outcome in the first study than does the competent male homeowner.

The predictions for competency and female shooters are opposite to those for males. A competent female shooter is more abnormal than is an incompetent one, and should consequently evoke the most counterfactual thinking. It should be relatively easy for subjects to imagine this person behaving in another way (more "normally"), and therefore not producing the outcome that did occur. Hence, the competent female shooter should be considered more likely to have committed a crime herself.

EXPERIMENT 1

Method

Subjects and design. Undergraduates (41 females; 41 males) participated in exchange for course credit in introductory psychology. Half of each gender were randomly assigned to read a scenario representing a 2 (outcome of shooting event: homeowner hits or misses the target) \times 2 (sex of the shooter) between-subjects design.

Materials and procedure. Subjects were asked to read a one-page summary of a case that was ostensibly derived from police records. In the description, either Larry or Susan Matthews, after going to bed, heard noises downstairs. Once it was determined that an intruder was indeed in the home and that the burglar was removing his or her stereo system, the homeowner dialed 911 for help. At this point in the scenario, the homeowner removed a handgun from the nightstand and proceeded to walk down the stairs to where he/she believed the intruder was. The homeowner saw a male figure who was masked and holding the homeowner's stereo system in his arms. When the intruder looked toward the homeowner, the homeowner shot at the intruder. In the com-

petent shooter condition the homeowner's shot hit the intruder, and in the incompetent condition the shot hit the wall. In both cases, the intruder ran away and the police apprehended him three blocks away from the home where the attempted burglary occurred.

Respondents were asked to indicate whether, based on the event they read, they would vote guilty or not guilty if they were a juror and the homeowner were charged with criminal assault. Degree of confidence in the verdict was then rated on an 8-point Likert scale (1 = not at all confident; 8 = extremely confident). On the following page, subjects were asked to select the sentence (25 linearly ordered options were provided) that they thought appropriate, if the homeowner were found guilty.

Two manipulation checks were employed. The first assessed the sex of the homeowner. The shooting competence manipulation was assessed with an 8-point Likert scale asking how skillful the homeowner was in the use of the weapon, where higher numbers reflected greater perceived skill.

Results

Manipulation checks. All respondents correctly identified the sex of the homeowner. A 2 (sex of subject) \times 2 (shooter sex) \times 2 (shooting outcome) analysis of the homeowner's skill in weapon use resulted in a significant main effect of outcome only, $F(1,74) = 119.5$; $P < .001$. When the homeowner's shot hit the intruder he/she was perceived as more skillful ($M = 5.5$) than when the shot missed the intruder ($M = 2.3$). Hence the skill manipulation was equally effective for both the male and female homeowners.

Guilt and confidence measures. A large majority of the subjects (87%) considered the homeowner not guilty of criminal assault. While the 2 (sex of shooter) \times 2 (shooting outcome) chi-square analysis of the guilty votes did not quite attain significance, a majority (64%) of the guilty votes that did occur were for the male shooter who missed.

To create a more sensitive measure of perceived certainty concerning the homeowner's guilt or innocence, the dichotomous guilt (coded as +1) no guilt (coded as -1) measure was combined with the confidence measure, resulting in a +8 to -8 scale where high positive numbers indicated confidence in guilt and high negative numbers reflected strong confidence that the target was not guilty. A 2 (sex of subject) \times 2 (shooter sex) \times 2 (shooting outcome) analysis of subjects' confidence concerning the homeowner's guilt/lack of guilt of criminal assault resulted in a main effect of shooter sex, $F(1,74) = 8.5$; $P < .005$, and an almost significant two-way interaction between the shooter's sex and the outcome, $F(1,74) = 3.5$; $P < .06$. Overall the homeowners were generally perceived as not guilty, and female shooters in particular were least likely to be considered guilty. However, as expected, subjects were indeed less confident that the male shooter who missed the intruder was innocent ($M = -2.50$) compared to the male shooter who succeeded in hitting the intruder ($M = -4.75$). The opposite tendency for female shooters was observed. Competent female shooters ($M = -5.68$) created more doubt about their lack of guilt than did incompetent female shooters ($M = -6.60$).

Sentencing measure. Subjects were extremely lenient in their recommended sentence for the homeowner. Presumably, their lack of willingness to punish reflects their relative certainty that the homeowner was not guilty of a crime. A 2 (sex of subject) \times 2 (shooter sex) \times 2 (shooting outcome) analysis of the sentencing option selected for the homeowner produced only a main effect of shooter sex, $F(1,72)$

= 4.0; $P < .05$. Less punishment was advocated for female shooters ($M = 2.4$) than for male shooters ($M = 3.4$), with this difference concerning the level of the fine recommended. Subjects were overall more confident that female shooters were not guilty (-6.12), relative to their male counterparts (-3.63); hence less punishment was also recommended.

Discussion

When exactly use of deadly force on the part of one human being against another is legally justified varies by state in the United States, although for the most part three conditions need to be met. Specifically, the shooting of another person (e.g., a home intruder) can be deemed justifiable and legal if it can be demonstrated that the intruder had the ability, opportunity, and intention of causing grave bodily harm or death to the occupant of that residence [see Kates and Engberg, 1983; and Lafave and Scott, 1972, for further legal discussions on the use of deadly force]. A large majority of our subjects considered the actions of the homeowner in the scenario to be *not* criminal in nature. Subjects seemed to infer that the homeowner's life was indeed threatened by the intruder, and that the female homeowner especially had a right to shoot the intruder under these circumstances. Perhaps this leniency for the female homeowner as a consequence of our portraying the burglar as a male. Nevertheless, because the scenario was insufficiently ambiguous—there was a virtual ceiling effect on the female homeowner's lack of guilt—the role of stereotype-inconsistency could only be genuinely examined here in the male shooter condition. In the competent male shooter condition, subjects were more likely to be confident that he was not guilty compared to when he missed the target.

Given that the scenario was not sufficiently ambiguous to fully test the hypothesis, a second study where the perceived threat to the homeowner was lower is warranted. In addition, to rule out differential injury caused to the intruder as an explanation for the findings, in the second study the injury caused to the intruder was identical in both the skilled and unskilled conditions because the bullet always hit the intruder. However, in the competent condition the homeowner's success in shooting was attributed to skill with guns, and in the incompetent condition it was attributed to luck. Furthermore, to detect variations in responses to this less legally justifiable event, the dichotomous guilt measure was converted to several continuous scales—evaluations of the homeowner, blame for the injury caused, and severity of punishment advocated—allowing a more thorough examination of the inferences made about the homeowner.

Finally, in the second experiment, the impact of pre-existing beliefs about guns on judgments about the homeowner's actions was explored. Specifically, the degree to which subjects believe that guns protect their owners from harm was assessed before participation in the experiment. This subscale of the Attitudes Toward Guns measure was selected because it is most relevant to the event depicted in the scenario, an individual actually using a gun to "protect" his or her person or property [see Branscombe et al., 1991]. It was expected that for persons who believe that gun ownership should provide protection from negative outcomes (e.g., criminal victimization or a police investigation into their actions), the event described should represent a greater departure from their expectancies or pre-existing beliefs than it would be for individuals who do not agree with the notion that guns can protect their owners from harm. Because of this additional source of unexpectedness, individuals high on this attitude measure should

show the largest differences in judgments of the homeowner; such persons should be most negative in the experimental conditions that also represent a deviation from other expectancies—those that violate stereotypic norms.

EXPERIMENT 2

Method

Subjects and design. During mass testing, several weeks before the actual experiment, participants completed the Attitudes Toward Guns Scale [Branscombe et al., 1991]. Scores on the 5-item subscale “guns provide protection” could range between 8 and 40 and they were recorded for each experimental participant. Equal numbers of male and female undergraduates (40 of each gender) who had completed this attitude measure were then randomly assigned in a 2 (shooter sex) \times 2 (skilled or unskilled gun user) between-subjects design.

Materials and procedure. Participants were given a one-page summary of a shooting incident. In this event, a man or a woman woke up during the night and heard noises outside his or her home. The homeowner took a .38 caliber revolver *outside* to investigate. A teenager had broken into her/his car and was in the midst of removing the stereo. The homeowner then warned the youth that she/he has a gun and to freeze. The youth drops the stereo and turns to run away. The homeowner aims and fires the gun. The bullet hits the teenager on the right side of his chest. The competency manipulation was introduced at this point. The officer at the scene states in the competent condition that “she/he meant to shoot the kid, and the bullet hit its target. She/he definitely knew how to use a gun!” In the incompetent condition the officer states that “she/he meant to shoot the kid, and the bullet ricocheted off the ground. She/he definitely did not know how to use a gun!” In all conditions, the officer adds that “while I sympathize with Mr./Ms. Crane’s desire to protect his/her property, I cannot condone his/her actions. Because his/her life was not threatened, we are considering the possibility of charging him/her with armed criminal assault. At this time, we haven’t decided whether or not to file charges against Mr./Ms. Crane.”

To assess evaluations of the homeowner, subjects were asked to write down the five traits that they thought were most descriptive of that individual. After listing the characteristics, following the procedure of Eagly and Mladinic [1989], subjects went back and rated each attribute on an 8-point extremely negative to extremely positive scale. Overall liking for the homeowner was also assessed with an 8-point scale (1 = not at all likable; 8 = very likable).

Next, subjects were asked to indicate how much blame for the youth’s injury should be assigned to the homeowner. Any value from 0% to 100% could be selected. Several items tapping subjects’ beliefs about the extent to which the homeowner should be punished for shooting the youth were assessed with 8-point Likert scales, where lower numbers indicate the homeowner should not be charged and punished. Respondents rated the extent to which they felt the homeowner should be charge with armed criminal assault, whether the homeowner should be convicted if charged, to what extent the homeowner deserves to be punished for the injury caused, deserves to be punished to correct future behavior, and deserves to be punished as an example to others. Two manipulation check items were completed. Subjects indicated whether the homeowner who

fired the gun was male or female. They also checked whether the homeowner's ability to use a gun was skillful or unskillful.

Results

Regression equations with the following three independent variables and their interactions¹ were used to predict each of the dependent variables: a dummy code for shooter sex, a dummy code for the competence condition, and the continuous variable of "guns provide protection" subscale of the Attitudes Toward Guns Scale.

Manipulation checks. Inspection of the items asking whether the homeowner was male or female and skillful or unskillful in the use of a gun indicated that four subjects erroneously perceived the conditions that they had been assigned to. The data from these four persons were discarded. Otherwise, all subjects correctly perceived the experimental manipulations.

Evaluations of the homeowner. Cronbach's standardized alpha coefficient for the positivity or negativity of the traits ascribed to the homeowner and the overall liking rating was .69. Consequently, these ratings were averaged to produce a general measure of evaluation. When this measure of evaluation was regressed on the independent variables, a significant two-way interaction between the shooter's sex and competence level (-1.41 standardized coefficient; $P < .05$) was obtained, although it was qualified by the three-way interaction including the attitude variable (1.54 standardized coefficient; $P < .05$). As shown in Figure 1, this three-way interaction indicates that as subjects' scores on the guns provide protection measure increase so too does their tendency to dislike skillful female shooters. Unskillful male shooters are also liked less than the two stereotype-consistent targets among individuals who believe that guns provide protection. Those who do not believe that guns are protective show a weak trend in the opposite direction.

Blame for injury assigned to the homeowner. When percentage of blame assigned to the homeowner was regressed on the independent variables, the two-way interaction between the skill of the shooter and the shooter's sex approached significance (1.05 standardized coefficient; $P < .08$), and the three-way interaction including the attitude measure tended to qualify the effect of the two experimental variables (-1.29 standardized coefficient; $P < .07$). The pattern as shown in Figure 2 is of the same form as that observed for evaluations of the homeowner. Subjects who believe that guns provide protection blame the homeowner more for the outcome when the target of evaluation is stereotype-inconsistent, especially a skilled female. Those who disagree that guns provide protection tend to blame the stereotype-inconsistent skilled female homeowner the least.

Punishment advocated for the homeowner. The alpha reliability coefficient for the five items assessing the extent to which the homeowner should be prosecuted and punished was high at .89. When the mean of these items was regressed on the independent variables, the shooter sex by skill interaction was significant (1.50 standardized coefficient; $P < .05$), as was the three-way interaction including the attitude measure (-1.64 standardized coefficient; $P < .05$). As illustrated in Figure 3, as subjects' adherence to the belief that guns provide protection increases so too does their desire to punish a skillful female shooter, while desire to punish a skillful male or unskillful

¹Analyses with sex of subject, as well as all interactions involving this variable, were also performed. The four-way interaction was not significant for any of the dependent measures.

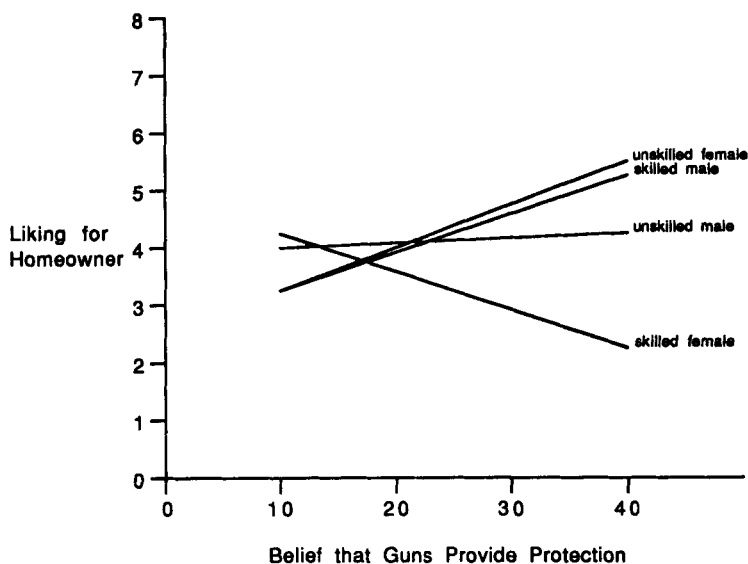


Fig. 1. Perceived likability of the homeowner by shooting skill, sex of the shooter, and degree of agreement with the belief that guns provide protection.

female decreases. When the respondents strongly disagree with the notion that guns provide protection, the stereotype-inconsistent homeowners are treated more leniently than those who behave according to normative expectations. For those who do not believe guns protect, the skilled male is perceived as deserving particularly severe punishment.

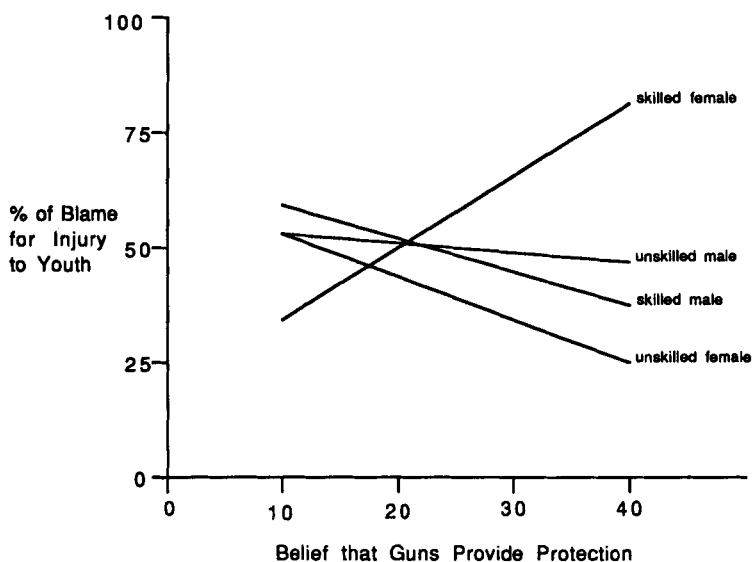


Fig. 2. Percentage of blame assigned to the homeowner by shooting skill, sex of the shooter, and degree of agreement with the belief that guns provide protection.

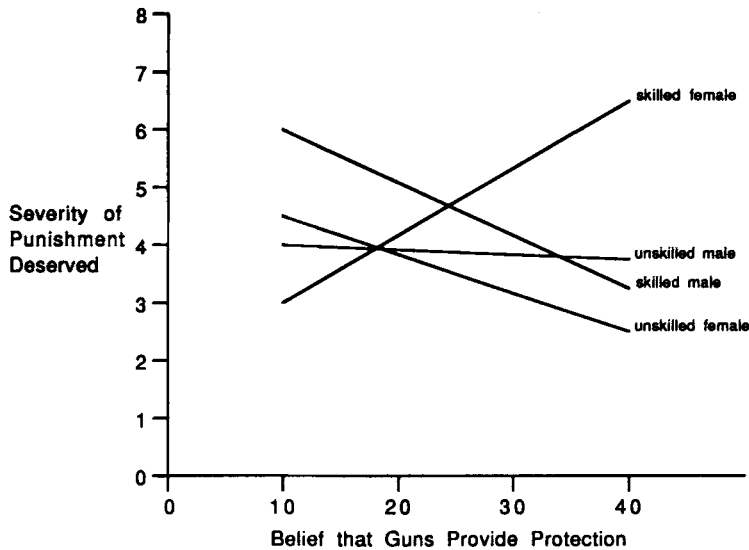


Fig. 3. Severity of the punishment advocated for the homeowner by shooting skill, sex of the shooter, and degree of agreement with the belief that guns provide protection.

Discussion

For those individuals who believe that guns will protect their owners, stereotype-inconsistent targets, especially skilled female shooters, were evaluated less positively, were considered more to blame for the outcome, and as deserving greater punishment than stereotype-consistent targets. Less dramatic differences on these dependent measures were observed for those persons who do not believe that guns provide protection. In fact, there was a tendency for those who do not believe that guns provide protection to perceive the stereotype-inconsistent targets more positively, blame them less, and advocate less punishment relative to the stereotype-consistent targets. Previous research has shown that the guns provide protection from crime subscale is uniquely predicted by the presence of low adherence to feminist beliefs [Branscombe et al., 1991]. Such persons are more likely to concur with traditional gender stereotypes. For this reason, the stereotype-inconsistent targets represented a greater inconsistency with their prior beliefs about the consequences of gun ownership and how men and women ought to behave. Conversely, those who are low on the guns provide protection dimension are also high on feminism, making deviations from traditional stereotypic behavior less unusual for them than for persons who agree with the notion that guns provide protection. Consequently, for those who disagree that guns provide protection, to mentally imagine a different outcome to the event that occurred would require them to construct a simulation that changed normal actions to abnormal actions, precisely the type of simulation that norm theory predicts to be difficult and rare.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Stereotype-based expectancies guide judgment and decision-making processes. Deviations from stereotypic expectancies in Study 1, regardless of individual differences in

beliefs concerning the consequences of gun ownership, reduced confidence in the homeowner's innocence. In Study 2, the role of pre-existing attitudes towards guns moderated the interpretation of the homeowner's actions. For those who believe that guns provide protection and who subscribe to traditional gender stereotypes, the stereotype-inconsistent targets represent the greatest disconfirmation of their expectancies, leading to the most negative evaluations and increasing the blame and punishment advocated for their actions. This effect was especially clear cut in evaluations of the skilled female shooter. In contrast, those who are less positive about the value of guns and who have less stereotypic gender expectancies are less influenced by how skillfully the weapon is used and by whom. For these individuals, the stereotype-consistent targets tend to be held most responsible for their actions, particularly skillful male shooters.

Events involving guns are not simply judged based on their consequences. In Study 1, when the male shooter produced more serious consequences by hitting and injuring the intruder, he was perceived as less likely to be innocent than when he missed injuring the intruder entirely. In Study 2, the consequences to the thief were identical—a relatively serious injury. Yet pre-existing attitudes and deviations from expectations based on social category membership greatly determined perceptions of the event. People might even deny being guided by their gender stereotypes when making such social judgments, but nonetheless stereotype effects were clearly observed in the present research.

Norm theory suggests that unusual or unexpected events promote counterfactual thinking, a process whereby alternative courses of action and their likely outcomes are considered when judging a current event. The current work is the first to suggest that deviations from stereotype-based expectancies might be especially likely to encourage such mental simulations. While crimes in general, because of their unusual nature and frequently severe outcomes, are likely to lead people to imagine how “if only” other courses of action had been undertaken the outcome might have been otherwise, we have shown that an individual involved in a crime is especially likely to be blamed if he/she deviates from stereotypic expectations.

The counterfactual perspective is consistent with much traditional attributional theorizing. Weiner [1985], Kelley [1972], as well as Hilton and Slugoski [1986] have argued that behaviors that are low in distinctiveness, low in consensus, or perceived as controllable are likely to be attributed to the person rather than situational forces. The presence of these factors is likely to encourage extreme evaluations of the actor. Norm theory does, however, go beyond this in suggesting how these factors (e.g., low consensus) influence judgment. When an individual is perceived as abnormal, the likelihood of particular mental simulations increases. Simulations involving changes to the person's behavior or character (from atypical to typical) should be most likely to result in new outcomes, which in turn should increase certainty that the actor's behavior truly was the causal factor that generated the original outcome of the event. When, however, a person's actions are consistent with expectancies based on category membership, alternative realities are less likely to be constructed, making the person less likely to be held less responsible for the event. In this case, when expectancies concerning the target's behavior are not violated, then some other aspect of the situation may be simulated in order to assess whether the outcome might have been otherwise. In our experiments, the thief's behavior is the next likely candidate for simulation. When altering his behavior also changes the outcome that is then imagined, his perceived role might well be elevated instead of the homeowner's.

Expectancies for category members can, however, vary depending upon pre-existing attitudes. Individuals who vary in their beliefs concerning the value of guns as protective devices and the extent to which they differentiate between how men and women ought to behave, displayed different patterns of judgments. In all cases, however, judgment was a function of discrepancies from expectations—or specific information not provided in the scenario. Hence, people do not simply use the actual actions that did occur when deciding how appropriate those behaviors were; rather, imaginary actions—those that might have occurred if the participants had behaved differently—are used as the relevant comparison. One straightforward implication that follows from this analysis concerns legal decision-making. When judges instruct juries to consider “only the facts as presented in this case,” they may well be asking the impossible of human reasoners.

In fact, one of the most important tasks for attorneys during courtroom presentations we argue involves encouraging jurors to entertain particular counterfactuals. A prosecuting attorney for our homeowner simply needs to construct a plausible way in which a change in the homeowner’s behavior would have resulted in an entirely different outcome. The defense attorney’s job could be most easily accomplished by shifting the focus of attention in the simulation from the homeowner to the thief. When changes in the thief’s behavior (e.g., he did not try to run away), results in a new outcome (e.g., the shooting does not occur), then the thief’s role in the event might be perceived as more causal than the homeowner’s. However, the consequences of running multiple and conflicting simulations in sequence for the same event, which is likely to occur when both prosecuting and defense attorneys suggest different counterfactuals in their presentations, has not been explored and it would be an important avenue for future research.

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